

A Small Piece of Heaven

by Thom Cantrall

It was an unusual day for the far west end of Washington's Olympic Peninsula... the sun was shining. The air was warm and inviting. Imagine my surprise as I pulled off US Highway 101 in the town of Forks to top off my gas tank to be in need of neither a jacket nor raingear. It was early in June and I had no expectation for anything but rain and foul weather in this land where annual rainfall is measured feet rather than in inches. I was pleasantly surprised by this fortuitous turn of events. In a place where the sun can be obscured more than two hundred and twenty-five days per year, any day without cloud is to be celebrated.

My goal was clear in my mind. I had been looking forward to this period since last November when I discovered my own little corner of Eden while



elk hunting in this land of Roosevelt Elk and wet brush. I had sneaked in on a herd of some thirty-five animals but, not finding the animal I wanted, I sneaked back out and left them to their own devices, none the wiser as to my presence. One of the real

Roosevelt Elk in Timber

bonuses of hunting with bow and arrow was the opportunity to hunt in full stealth mode. This affords the delight of days like this had been. I had been within several feet of wild critters while they were totally unaware of me. To be allowed the privilege of observing these largest of the elk species of North America from arm's length was worth much more than the cost of license and tags.

In my exit from the valley of Goodman Creek, I happened on a spot that drew me back on this prime June day in 1973. I was right on the creek, walking upstream when I encountered an area that looked like a park. The timber was a mix of Western Hemlock (*Tsuga Heterophylla*) and Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga Menzesii*) with few Sitka Spruce (*Picea Sitchensis*) also there. The stature of these trees was amazing to behold. Here were trees exceeding ten feet in diameter with a canopy so high that it seemed to tickle the very belly of heaven. Because the trees were so large and the canopy so tight, there was no understory at all. There were not even brushes growing in this park. Again, due to size, the trees were widely separated, leaving more room on the floor than would normally be expected in such an area.

On the north side of the creek there was a wide gravel/sand bar where the stream made a sweeping turn away from the park. At the edge of the sloping beach was a step of about a foot up onto the forest floor. Here, among these northern giants, the floor was even and smooth. Not so much as an old stump marred the pleasing esthetics of the area. The gravel bar beach was in direct sunlight for a few hours in the middle of the long, late-spring day and



salmon berries and huckleberries grew in profusion on the south side of the stream adjacent to the sun-speckled clearing. Here and there, huge old trees lay in the creek creating natural hiding areas for the myriad fish living there.

Goodman Creek

The demise of these huge trees was proof that nothing resisted the inexorable pressure of water forever. As surely as the Colorado River had reamed out the Grand Canyon, the flowing waters of a creek never more than ten feet in width at this time of year persisted in its efforts and eventually, undercut

and fell these behemoths who dared challenge the creek's right to flow where it wished.

For days my companion and I communed with our Maker on this piece of ground He had taken a bit of extra time to prepare for we two of his children. We fished daily, taking a few of the fat, hungry and very tasty



cutthroat trout He had placed here for our use. We picked the bright berries that grew in profusion and even found enough oyster mushrooms to satisfy our hunger for these especial fungi.

On one evening we were afforded a

Oyster Mushrooms... eat as is... very tasty

special airing of His first-run show when a band of Roosevelt Elk moved through the park in their never-ending quest for food. I believe this was the first time I'd actually watched the elk feed off the bane of foresters and loggers all over the Pacific Northwest, Devil's Club (*Oplopanax Horribilus*). As the Latin name would



suggest, this is, indeed a horrible plant.

Devil's Club is a low shrub that grows up from the ground in a bowed, sweeping arc. The



Devil's Club Thorns

stems from the ground to the leaf whorl are from six to ten feet in length and are totally covered over their entire circumference and length in tiny, loosely attached thorns. At the very

upper end of the upswept stalk, a single whorl of large, deciduous leaves surround the stalk and the flower and meristem, the area of new growth emerges from the center of this whorl. A red berry, the fruit of the plant emerges in early summer and ripens later. It is this delicate center portion the elk cannot ignore. I have watched them for hours as they gingerly reach out and up toward the plague of thorns, thorns that are designed with minute barbs such that should one stick in skin, or even in clothing, it will patiently work its way into one's body creating a festering, suppurating wound, and carefully pluck that tender new growth with the delicacy of a surgeon opening a living heart.

By sitting totally still and watching closely, we saw the beauty of the wild at work here. We watched new-born calves, only minutes old, on rickety legs suckle life-giving milk from patient mothers who did all they could to sustain their offspring. Young bulls, antlers just beginning to grow, bounced



and gamboled in play in the manner of all youth. And, watching it all with a careful eye was the herd's lead cow. We watched as the cows barked and mewed at erring calves. We watched as the cows communicated one with another as they shifted slowly along their route... a route so old in time that none here

Very Young Calf

even knew why they did it so... it just was.. and is. Occasionally, the lead cow, one so much larger and heavier than the rest that she appeared to be of another species entirely, would bark out a warning and all eyes would be on her as she assessed that which had alarmed her. Soon, no predator having been detected, she calmed and returned to feeding whereby all with her did likewise.

Once, in this idyllic week, a bachelor herd of five mature bulls moved up the creek and through the park. Two of these five had to have weighed over fourteen hundred pounds. Their antlers, just beginning to grow were heavy at the bases and, I was sure, would be at least six points on a side when full growth was accomplished in the next couple of months.



That the elk used this area repeatedly came to me very early in my enjoyment of this park. The first night there, I cleared the ground where my tent would be set up, spread the ground cloth and erected my US Army surplus pup tent. Inside, I spread my US Army surplus

Bull in Spring... Antlers just beginning to grow

down filled mummy bag next to my companion's US Army surplus down filled mummy bag. From all outward appearances, all things were equal and thus did this misapprehension last until darkness had fallen and we retired to our respective bags. Immediately upon crawling into mine and zipping it up, I discovered the subtle, but distinct difference between mine and my companion's bag... Hers had no lump under it, mine did! Immediately on discovering this anomaly, I quizzed her about the possibility of trading bags for the night as one US Army surplus mummy bag was pretty much like every other US Army surplus mummy bag and surely she'd find this one more to her liking. Her rejection of this premise was instant and unremitting and, I felt, a bit harsh as well. I really saw no reason for her to cast aspersions on my analysis that, in making this



particular bag, that, perhaps, the maker had forgotten to remove the chicken from the feathers...

Since it was obvious that I was stuck with the bag with the chicken still attached, I went about making the best of it. I wriggled and

US Army Surplus Pup Tent

squirmed about until the blessed bird was no longer pressing between my shoulder blades and curled up around the offending lump. Please believe me when I say that wriggling and squirming sound much easier when one is not encased in a US Army surplus mummy bag. The mere act of moving is difficult at best and sometimes borders on impossible. Suffice to say that in this semi-U position, coiled fetally around the offending lump, I spent a not so comfortable, but passingly torturous night that lasted at least one hundred hours. Whenever I tried to move to alleviate the pressure on overstressed muscles or joints, that knob was back again! By the time the sun rose, that lump had increased my vocabulary by at least five new words! That was not a bad thing, I suppose, though it might have been better had the five new words combined for more than twenty letters. Being an ex-sailor and a logger, I really didn't need to learn any new words of that sort. Their proclivity for jumping out at socially inappropriate times rendered them a major liability! First light brought with it my emergence from my exile and, while I usually handle the breakfast chores in camp, this morning I delegated those duties and set about delving into the mystery of the immovable lump. By daylight, I had determined that the offending lump was not in or part of my bag. I had found that even with me and my bag removed, the lump was still there in the ground cloth that served as a floor to the tent. I started by removing the bags, then the ground cloth and what

I found surprised me. It appeared that a small root or shoot was sticking up from the ground. Now, since it had not shown above the ground level when I laid the ground cloth, it must have been there, just at or below the surface,



waiting for my weight to bring the surface level down below its level. Thinking this would be the work of but a moment, I took my sheathe knife that I always

Shed Elk Antler

carried at times like these and began the task of digging down far enough that I could cut it off and I could fill in over it and that would be the end of that. Wrong! The deeper I dug, the deeper the shaft went... and the larger it became. By the time I had dug down about eight inches, I finally realized what I was dealing with. I was excavating the tine from an elk antler. By the time I had moved the tent, the ground cloth, both US Army surplus mummy bags and about twenty cubic yards of soil, I was amazed. What I had allowed to disturb my night's sleep was the very tip of one tine on a single six-point elk antler, much like the one pictured above! Believe me when I say that the second night was much more comfortable in my US Army surplus pup tent and I kept that antler for several years. In fact, I collected them until I had quite the pile of them. I gave them away to the Buckskinners I knew who used them in making 18th century period clothing and accoutrements to their black powder rifles and lifestyle.



I continued to return to this place for a number of years, the last time in about 1986 and I hope it is today as it was then. One day I'm going back there just to see, if I should be allowed to live so long, but in the interim, it lives well in my memory... just a bit west of US Highway 101 on a tiny creek between the Bogachiel and Hoh Rivers... my own little corner of Eden.